
Bridging the Gap

*A Report of the Task Force
on the Recognition of
Foreign Qualifications:
Summary Report*



GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Summary Report

To participate fully in today's rapidly changing and dynamic society, people need relevant training and skills, and recognized qualifications. But educational systems and standards of practice vary immensely from country to country, and most new Canadians obtained their educational credentials and experience outside Canada. The qualifications foreign-trained people bring must be verified and evaluated in relation to Alberta standards by employers, licensing bodies, and other authorities. The process of evaluation and verification can be complicated and difficult, the results sometimes disappointing.

The Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications was established by the Government of Alberta in December 1988. It was established in response to concerns about inadequate recognition of foreign qualifications expressed by foreign-trained individuals and organizations representing them; and to specific recommendations from the Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues. The Task Force was a fact finding body, consisting of senior government officials and reporting to the Minister Responsible for Professions and Occupations, the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, and the Chair of the Council on Professions and Occupations. The membership represented the departments of Advanced Education, Attorney General, Career Development and Employment, Culture and Multiculturalism, Economic Development and Trade, Health, and Public Works, Supply and Services. Representatives from the Professions and Occupations Bureau and the Women's Secretariat acted as Chair and Vice-Chair respectively. Other departments and agencies provided specific information and assistance as required.

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

The Task Force prepared a series of questionnaires specifically directed to stakeholders, both those involved in *seeking* entrance and those involved in *granting* entrance to professions and trades. The findings of the Task Force are based on the responses to questionnaires, written submissions and oral presentations from groups and individuals, and specific consultations with groups, institutions, organizations, employers, government representatives and individuals.

It became apparent that, while the recognition of foreign qualifications in professions and trades poses significant problems, it is only one aspect of a much broader problem. Initially the Task Force was to review approaches and policies relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications in regulated professions and trades. However, while many people work in these professions and trades, many more do not. Yet, they too must meet established qualification requirements — those set by employers. We found that the most serious problem facing people with foreign qualifications, in both the "regulated" and "unregulated" sectors of the labour market, was in obtaining a fair, thorough and credible assessment of their qualifications. Not unreasonably, most employers, educational institutions, professional and trade associations and other licensing bodies that set occupational standards want and need to have foreign qualifications equated to Alberta standards. At present, however, there is no government department or related agency charged with the full range of these responsibilities.

Because of this larger problem, the Task Force broadened its focus to study issues related to the recognition of all foreign qualifications, not only those required for the regulated professions and trades.

The Alberta government, immigrant serving and ethnocultural organizations, other service groups, training institutions, professional associations, regulatory agencies and other licensing bodies are striving to meet the diverse needs of their clientele. However, appropriate resources and levels of service are necessary to make the system more responsive. The foundations for support in Alberta are strong, and they are reinforced through other government and community initiatives.

Practitioners in the professions and trades must meet the standards established to ensure safe and competent services to the public. While it is important that the regulatory process screen out applicants who are not competent and may endanger the public, the regulatory process should not impose artificial standards, or arbitrary or irrelevant requirements. Regulatory bodies have a dual responsibility: on the one hand they must ensure all applicants meet minimum standards in the interests of public protection; on the other, they must ensure that processes used to determine whether individual applicants meet these standards are fair and allow all competent practitioners the opportunity to offer their services to the public.

Our objective is a system that "screens in", without compromising standards, qualified people to professions and occupations. Those who, for various reasons, are "screened out" should be advised of available options. Government must take a leadership role in establishing the

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

parameters within which its departments, agencies and public institutions address the recognition of foreign qualifications and provide support and services. Professional associations and employers too must examine their policies and procedures to ensure they meet these objectives and are consistent with the principles of natural justice. We trust this report will be helpful as a guide to achieving these goals.

The Task Force members believe the recommendations in this report will help to solve the major problems encountered by people with foreign training and experience. Furthermore, if Alberta is to have a strong and competitive economy, we need skilled people in the professions and trades as well as in manufacturing, construction and business. Recognition of the qualifications brought by immigrants to Alberta is the recognition of a resource that benefits all Albertans.

In the following sections we will summarize the major findings and recommendations of the Task Force.

Access to information

Several individuals reported that they came to Canada based on information from immigration officers who indicated the individuals would have no difficulty in practising their occupation in Canada. However, when they arrived they discovered that their qualifications were not recognized. The process of recognizing foreign qualifications is complex, involving professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, educational institutions, and government. Understanding and negotiating the regulatory system to

obtain an assessment of qualifications is difficult because many new Canadians may not be familiar with our institutions, customs, or norms. Many, struggling with the English language, have difficulty understanding instructions or information that is provided.

Lack of access to information causes unintentional but significant obstacles. Individuals are unable to pursue careers in which they have already invested much time and effort. This is a serious loss to them and their families. The economy also suffers a loss, both in terms of skilled workers and the cost of retraining, underemployment and, in some cases, public assistance.

Recommendation 1

To address the problem of lack of access to information, the Task Force recommends that the Government of Alberta establish an information centre, available to all Albertans including immigrants and other Canadians, that would

- **provide computer based information plus referral service about the qualifications that are necessary to practise a profession or trade in Alberta and the processes and requirements that an applicant may encounter;**
- **provide, in one location, an accessible and visible service that can help people locate the appropriate agencies for reviewing and approving foreign qualifications;**
- **be a repository of information that could be accessed by immigrants, potential immigrants, immigrant serving organizations, ethnocultural organizations, educational institutions, employers, and federal and provincial governments.**

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Evaluation of education obtained abroad

For most individuals with foreign qualifications, there is no agency to evaluate their qualifications and equate them to Alberta standards in an accurate, consistent, and timely fashion. When evaluation is available, consistent standards and methods are often not applied. This results in widely different appraisals and perceptions of unfair treatment.

In our judgement, the problems we discovered in many parts of the system (involving regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, educational institutions and employers) do not reflect an intent to discriminate. In order to conduct appropriate assessments, considerable expertise in comparative education and ongoing contact with international educational organizations is necessary. Many of the existing bodies simply do not have the necessary resources or expertise to carry out assessments of foreign qualifications. Other jurisdictions are finding that centralization of this function provides greater effectiveness and consistency as well as enhanced efficiency because of the economies of scale involved.

Recommendation 2

To address the problems identified in the evaluation of education, the Task Force recommends that the Government of Alberta establish a centre to assess academic qualifications in terms of Alberta high school, trade, college, and university standards. The activities of the assessment centre would be advised by a committee composed of representatives from immigrant serving organizations and ethnocultural groups, professions, trades, educational institutions and employers. This centre would

- authenticate foreign and out-of-province academic qualifications and evaluate them in terms of Alberta high school, trade, college and university standards;
- be accessible to immigrants, immigrant serving organizations, ethnocultural organizations, Canadians from other provinces, professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, educational institutions, employers and governments; and
- provide assessments that professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, educational institutions and employers could use in determining equivalencies to Alberta educational standards and requirements.

An essential component of this proposal would be the establishment of a committee which would advise the centre's management and the minister responsible for the centre. In addition to providing the necessary technical and policy expertise to the centre, we also see the advisory committee as a tool to help establish the credibility of the centre. In order for the centre to be successful, it must be accepted by the people who use it. The best way to achieve this is through the advisory committee which will help to establish the service and the

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

processes, procedures and standards the centre uses to arrive at its results.

We propose that this service operate in a fashion similar to the service that has been in operation in Quebec since 1976. The focus of the centre would be "service" rather than "regulation". The various regulatory bodies in the province already have the regulatory authority required to make decisions about qualifications and standards. What is missing is a consistent capability to equate foreign qualifications to Alberta standards. This assessment centre would be attached to the information centre described in the previous recommendation, and together they could form a comprehensive service capable of assessing foreign qualifications, providing information and referring people to the appropriate regulatory agencies or educational institutions.

Professional training

Individuals who were members of regulated professions in their homeland contend that the training programs and experience obtained there are not evaluated fairly by professional licensing bodies here. Some contend that the Alberta bodies deliberately discriminate to exclude them from the relevant profession.

The Alberta government's policy on professional legislation requires that academic and experiential qualifications be set by a body at arm's length from the profession. The reason for this is to guard against a profession being able to limit the number of its members for the economic benefit of current members. The Universities Coordinating

Council (UCC) carries out this responsibility for several, but not all, professions in Alberta.

Although the UCC is structurally independent of the professions, it is often seen to be a part of them. It frequently relies on the same individuals as the profession when evaluating qualifications. In some cases, it delegates its functions back to the professional association. Several organizations and individuals who have dealt with the UCC believe it is dominated and controlled by the professions and the objectivity intended by the arm's length relationship to the professions is lost. In addition, the UCC has not appointed public members to its professional examination boards (as required by the Government's policy statement, *Principles and Policies Governing Professional Legislation in Alberta*) because it does not have the funds to cover the costs of public representatives.

Several organizations and individuals argued the UCC does not provide adequate information about educational deficiencies and how they can be corrected when an applicant's education program does not meet the full requirements of the Council. In addition, these organizations and individuals told us that the UCC does not provide complete information about its evaluation processes and procedures, and that applicants cannot fully understand how their qualifications are being evaluated.

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Recommendation 3

To address the problems identified in the evaluation of training by the Universities Coordinating Council, the Task Force recommends that the Council

- **assess its current policies and procedures for evaluating applicants' educational qualifications and make necessary changes to ensure that its review processes and decisions remain independent of professional associations and licensing bodies;**
- **place public members on all of its examining boards;**
- **provide accurate, timely and complete information to applicants at all stages of the application process; and**
- **provide complete and timely information to applicants on any deficiencies in their training.**

Work experience

A major concern of individuals with foreign qualifications is that foreign work experience is not recognized by licensing bodies who require work experience as a part of their registration qualifications. Several individuals and organizations characterized this as a "catch 22" situation. They reported that employers will not hire foreign graduates who are not registered. However, foreign graduates cannot become registered unless they find employment to acquire the necessary Canadian work experience.

The Task Force believes that resolution of this problem rests squarely in the hands of those who regulate and those who employ members of

regulated professions or trades. It challenges regulatory agencies and licensing bodies, employers, individual employers, and government to work cooperatively to solve this work experience problem.

Recommendation 4

To address the problems concerning work experience, the Task Force recommends

- (a) that professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades**
 - review their Canadian work experience requirements to ensure that the duration and the type of experience required are appropriate;
 - develop and clearly describe the specific objectives of Canadian work experience requirements so that applicants and potential employers have a clear understanding of the learning that is expected during the period;
 - examine alternatives to work experience, such as temporary or restricted registration and implement these alternatives as appropriate;
 - inform their members about the problems new Canadians have in obtaining Canadian experience and encourage their members to provide the required experience; and
 - find ways of evaluating and accepting appropriate non-Canadian experience;
- (b) that the governments of Alberta and Canada**
 - communicate the needs of foreign-trained graduates in respect to Canadian experience requirements to employers and the public in general;

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

- **within the framework of job strategy programs, continue to assist individuals with foreign qualifications to meet Canadian work experience requirements; and**
 - **continue to encourage employers to provide appropriate education and training for managers who work with a culturally diverse workforce and for staff who provide services to a culturally diverse clientele;**
- (c) **that employers**
- **provide mechanisms and programs which will allow foreign-trained applicants to gain appropriate Canadian work experience; and**
 - **provide appropriate education and training for managers who work with a culturally diverse workforce and for staff who provide services to a culturally diverse clientele.**

Registration examinations

Examinations are used by regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for several professions and trades in Alberta as a means of assessing whether an applicant should be admitted to a profession or trade. Several foreign-trained individuals and organizations that represent them believe these examinations are arbitrary and unfairly screen out qualified applicants.

Some licensing bodies use national examinations that are widely accepted as a part of the entrance qualifications to practise a profession or trade in Canada. Other professions and trades have developed

provincial examinations, which are used in Alberta but not elsewhere. In some cases, only applicants with foreign or out-of-province qualifications are required to take licensing examinations.

One of the strongest features of the trade certification process in Alberta has been the provision for foreign-trained trades people to write challenge examinations. Separate examinations have been available as a challenge for each year of a trade certification program. The Task Force applauds this system because it has resulted in high levels of access to the trades for people with foreign qualifications.

The Task Force also supports the development and use of national certification and licensure examinations. In addition to improving portability of qualifications among Canadian provinces, national examinations facilitate uniformity in standards and assessment processes. They also promote equity, because all applicants are measured with the same yardstick.

We recognize the potential for an unfair examination to arbitrarily screen applicants out. But we also recognize that properly constructed examinations can afford individuals with foreign qualifications an opportunity to demonstrate qualifications that may otherwise be difficult to evaluate. Nonetheless, in all cases where licensing bodies use examinations, they have a responsibility to ensure that the examinations are demonstrably fair.

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Recommendation 5

To address concerns respecting examinations in both the professions and trades, the Task Force recommends that

- **the Government of Alberta preserve the system of challenge examinations in the *Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act*;**
- **the Government of Alberta, the Universities Coordinating Council, professional associations and regulatory agencies and licensing bodies ensure that examinations meet all of the usual standards that have been developed by organizations with recognized expertise in examination development; and**
- **the professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, actively support the development and use of national examinations.**

Language training

In absolute terms, the number of immigrants requiring language training continues to rise along with immigration levels. Training in English is essential if new Canadians are to be successfully integrated as productive citizens in the province. To a considerable degree, current English language training focuses mainly on English for survival purposes. Individuals with foreign qualifications have difficulty obtaining training in English that will enable them to practise in their chosen professions, trades, or other careers that require technical language competence.

Recommendation 6

To address concerns respecting language training, the Task Force recommends that

- **the Government of Alberta, educational institutions and other Alberta agencies continue to work cooperatively to improve the access to and relevance of English as a Second Language education;**
- **the movement toward offering English as a Second Language courses or training in a two phase approach starting with general language courses complemented by occupation and profession specific language courses be continued;**
- **associations representing professions or trades take more responsibility for describing and providing specialized English training required for participation in specific professions or trades in the context of upgrading or retraining programs; and**
- **as resources permit, the Government of Alberta, professional associations, and employers expand specialized language program offerings in such areas as English in the Workplace; English for Special Purposes Training such as pre-employment and occupation-specific training; and programs specific to homebound immigrants, particularly women.**

Language testing

The Task Force recognizes that there may be a role for testing English language competency in professional registration and licensure. It is concerned, however, that present requirements are often established and applied in an arbitrary manner bearing little relationship to the requirements of the profession. In view of this we recommend discontinuation of the use of standardized tests of English language

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

competency as the final or sole determinant of eligibility for professional registration and licensure. At the same time we would encourage the use of Test of English as a Foreign Language or any other similar tests for diagnostic purposes, where the assessment is intended to assist individuals in achieving educational and professional goals.

Recommendation 7

To address the problems related to language testing, the Task Force recommends that

- **professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades use standardized tests of English language competency for diagnostic and remedial purposes;**
- **professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades discontinue the use of such tests as sole and final determinants of eligibility for professional registration; and**
- **assessment of English language competency for the purposes of registration and licensure remain the responsibility of professional associations.**

Access to retraining

Individuals with foreign qualifications must often take additional training to meet Alberta standards. They, as well as Canadian-trained individuals with partial qualifications, are faced with educational systems that have been designed as three or four year programs and have little or no flexibility to accommodate midstream access. The

result is that people who have invested a great deal of time and money to educate themselves and who meet most standards are unable to complete their training. The lack of an "educational bridge" means they are unable to enter the profession or trade for which they were originally trained. This results in a significant loss to the Alberta economy of qualified practitioners.

Recommendation 8

Recognizing that the issues in this area are very complex and that solutions will depend upon the cooperation of many participants, and the availability of resources, the Task Force recommends that the Government of Alberta

- **in consultation with educational institutions, promote improved midstream access to training programs;**
- **in consultation with professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, educational institutions and employers, promote the development of specific bridging programs; and**
- **in consultation with immigrant serving organizations, ethnocultural organizations, professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, employers and, where necessary, human rights organizations, promote the integration of all new Canadians into the workforce.**

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

Access to income support programs

After having their qualifications evaluated by a licensing body, many foreign-trained applicants are required to take additional training or obtain Canadian experience to bring their qualifications up to Canadian standards. While foreign-trained graduates are willing to meet all the requirements necessary to work in Alberta, many cannot complete the requirements for financial reasons.

Apart from financial assistance for language training, there are no income support programs specifically targeted to new Canadians seeking education directed at professional certification or employment preparation. New Canadians are, however, entitled to participate in the numerous programs available to everyone who requires income support for education, including the Canada Student Loan Program, provincial government bursaries, scholarships and assistantships in postsecondary educational institutions, as well as training allowances provided by the federal government for individuals who qualify through Employment and Immigration Canada.

In a rapidly changing technological society, individuals from all walks of life may need to upgrade their qualifications or even to change careers as existing ones become outdated. Except for the special case of language training, income support for retraining may be needed by all citizens, not only new Canadians. The Task Force, therefore, does not support the establishment of income support programs directed only to new Canadians. Such programs should be available to all.

Nonetheless, in the course of our investigation it became apparent that many new Canadians are unaware of available support programs. We believe the information centre described in our first recommendation will greatly assist new Canadians by making information about existing programs available to them.

Recommendation 9

Recognizing that access to financial resources is a problem for many Canadians seeking retraining, and recognizing that newcomers may experience unique difficulties in accessing available programs, the Task Force recommends that

- **students' financial support agencies make special efforts to reach out to new Canadians to ensure that they have equal opportunity to take full advantage of assistance programs that are available;**
- **immigrant serving organizations, ethnocultural organizations and the provincial government continue to encourage and assist new Canadians in Alberta to access the existing income support programs that are available for education and training purposes; and**
- **the information centre described in Recommendation 1 be responsible for collecting information about income support programs and making it available to new Canadians and other Albertans; and**
- **specific income support programs to help meet the education, retraining and upgrading costs of new Canadians not be established.**

We recognize that some may be disappointed because we have not recommended the establishment of support programs directed specifically to assisting new Canadians seeking to upgrade their

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

qualifications in terms of Canadian standards. This is not a denial of the problems faced by many immigrants. The inability to obtain financial assistance during periods of required retraining is an important obstacle for many. But it is an obstacle that exists for many Albertans, not only immigrants. Any support that is available for retraining should be available to all.

Conclusion

As a result of our research and analysis, and through the helpful input we received from many individuals and organizations, the Task Force came to the conclusion that there are problems and issues relating to the recognition of foreign qualifications. We believe new Canadians encounter significant difficulties in receiving proper recognition of the education and training they received in their homeland.

The individual and societal costs of this problem are not easily measurable, but they are significant. The Province, its institutions and citizens will all benefit by overcoming the obstacles that the Task Force uncovered in consultation with concerned individuals and groups.

Many organizations and groups who provided information suggested that we blame the regulatory agencies and professional associations who are the "gate keepers" for professions and trades. We found insufficient cause to do so. This does not imply that the regulatory system is functioning without problems.

The problem of recognition of foreign qualifications goes far beyond that of professions and trades. Foreign qualifications are, for a variety of reasons, being seriously discounted in most sectors of Alberta society. In some respects, prospective applicants to the professions and trades are the best off because at least they have a regulatory body to argue with.

The problems identified in this report are complex and they will not disappear overnight. The establishment of an assessment centre is required but, by itself, it will not solve all the problems. The service provided by the assessment centre will only be effective if it is well received and recognized by professional associations, regulatory agencies and licensing bodies for professions and trades, immigrant serving organizations, ethnocultural organizations, educational institutions, employers and governments. Accordingly, it is essential that these bodies contribute to the development of the centre from the beginning and at the ground level. We challenge these organizations to become part of this new venture rather than being critics of it.

The same challenge applies to the information centre. The information and referral service it provides will be only as good as the information received from primary sources, such as educational institutions, regulatory authorities, funding agencies, and governments.

The inability to obtain recognized Canadian work experience has meant that many new Canadians have not been able to work to fulfil the potential of their training. There are no easy answers to this problem. It is up to the professional and other regulatory bodies to take a lead

Task Force on the Recognition of Foreign Qualifications

role in solving this problem. We challenge them to develop new ways to assist new Canadians in obtaining necessary work experience.

A creative search for new ways to provide acceptable Canadian work experience would help new Canadians acquire the technical language they require to successfully practise their profession or trade in Alberta. Immigrant serving and ethnocultural organizations have a significant part to play. These groups are to be commended for identifying, and forcefully and eloquently articulating, the pervasive and interlocking nature of the difficulties encountered by new Canadians. They must continue to fulfil the special role of advocates for these people.

As enrolments explode, Albertans and other Canadians are discovering that the demand for educational opportunities has exceeded the capacity of most educational institutions to provide them. We are not suggesting that new Canadians have prior entitlement, but their special and unique needs must be considered as funding and spending priorities for education are determined.

English language competence is essential to effectively participate in Alberta's economy and society. Relative to most other provinces in Canada, Alberta has a good record for language training programs. However, there are still significant needs in this area and we must continue to focus on language training as a high priority.

Our final thought is simple. The next step forward must be a deliberate, cooperative effort of all organizations and individuals involved. Separately these groups will be ineffective in dealing with the

credentialing issues faced by new Canadians. But each holds a key to part of the solution. It is imperative that all groups work together, positively and constructively, so that all Albertans have an equal opportunity to contribute fully to the development of our province.

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